

The French Cult of the Modern: Power, Identity, and the Idiom of Newness in Nineteenth-Century France

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Abstract

Reflections on French modernity and modernity in general have customarily been associated with the notion of bourgeois social primacy, outlining a scheme in which industrialization, capitalism, and forms of middle-class sociability and culture have typically served as criteria for mapping the contours of Western modernity. This article seeks to reassess this conventional perspective by examining how the idiom of modernity played a central role in reformulating elite social identity in the midst of the rising democratic political culture taking shape in France during the middle of the nineteenth century. As elites came to terms with mass democracy and colonialism, concepts of modernity and “modern society” became hallmarks of a new public discourse with both inclusive and exclusionary implications, enshrining modernity as a key organizing principle in both the articulation of new social hierarchies and power relationships. This style of representing encouraged a shift toward an identity regime grounded in conceptions of time and temporality which not only broke with established tenets of “bourgeois” liberalism but equally sketched the outline of a new social order in which modernity became the legitimacy for power and domination in a country ostensibly committed to the principles of social equality and pluralism.

Keywords

French modernity, French colonialism, post-Revolutionary European culture, bourgeois social identity, modernization